

Nehemiah 10:31-34

“Refusing to Buy and Sell on the Sabbath”

“As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood *among* the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law.”

The reestablishment of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel, which would become known as the province of Yehud or Judea, was beset with various challenges. One of the significant challenges which the post-exilic leaders had to deal with, was intermarriage between Jewish men and local pagan women (10:30), which could very easily lead a small minority group to be assimilated away into the larger, local pagan community. The reestablishment of a viable Jewish community, would mean a commitment to observing Moses' Teaching (10:29), as well as recognizing those areas where Torah instruction could be (easily) violated, given the setting of this somewhat precarious group of people—with their religion tolerated by the Persian Empire to be sure—but nevertheless in a diverse environment.

Some readers of the Torah, in encountering various prohibitions issued against work or labor, may conclude that only heavy, physical actions are not permitted for the Sabbath—while merchandising might not similarly be prohibited. And surely, if merchandising of some sort could be permitted, then something as important as buying food for sustenance would be of such importance. Nehemiah 10:31-34 is often recognized to be a critical place where Sabbath regulations and applications of Torah instructions come into focus. The returned Jewish exiles were a minority in their own land, they needed to keep *Shabbat*, but what they were permitted and not permitted to do, really needed to be honed.

10:31 The returned exiles make a commitment to keeping the Sabbath: “The peoples of the land who bring their wares and all sorts of foodstuff for sale on the sabbath day—we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day. We will forgo *the produce* of the seventh year, and every outstanding debt” (NJPS). The *ammei ha'erezt* (עַמֵּי הָאֶרֶץ) living in the Land of Israel, were pagans for sure, as they did not acknowledge the God of Israel, His Torah or Law, or the Sabbath. More than likely, these were people groups which had encroached upon the Holy Land subsequent to the Babylonian exile, although some of them could have been descended from the transplanted groups brought in by the Assyrians, subsequent to the exile of the Northern Kingdom. The point made is that these people did offer *ha'maqachot v'kol-sever* (הַמַּקְחוֹת וְכֹל-שֶׁבֶר), “wares and all kinds of produce” (ATS) for purchase on *Shabbat*.

Unlike the periods of time before, when Ancient Israel had (almost) complete jurisdiction over the Holy Land, the province of Judea was a part of the much larger Persian Empire. The emerging Judaism which would develop into the Second Temple Judaism of the time of Yeshua of Nazareth, was a minority religion. Readers of Nehemiah ch. 10, do indeed witness how Sabbath observance would make the Jewish community separate and distinct. But what makes Nehemiah ch. 10 especially unique, is that at this time, in the Fifth Century B.C.E., the Jewish community was a *minority in its own land*. How easily would it be for temptations to present themselves, that something as important as the seventh-day Sabbath could be violated? **The peoples of the land could seemingly just show up in one's town, or even in the city of Jerusalem, on the Sabbath, and offer their goods for sale.**

Nehemiah 10:31-34 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

Mark A. Throntveit directs, "While all of the earlier legislation had promulgated rest on the Sabbath, in no instance do we see the buying of food defined as work as in these verses, directed to the present situation."¹ With produce available for sale on *Shabbat*—as everyone needs food to eat—an erosion of the institution of the Sabbath could easily set in. F. Charles Fensham observes, "For a small religious community in a larger world of heathens who did not hold the sabbath law, it became more and more difficult to keep it. The foreign merchants arrived in Jerusalem on the sabbath and wanted to do business (cf. Neh. 13:16). The way of least resistance was for the Jews to accommodate themselves to these foreign customs. But in this verse the Jews put themselves under obligation to withhold from participating in any transactions on the sabbath."² Things could have started off seemingly innocent, as the intermarriage of Jewish men with pagan women likely did in various cases—but the results would not have been good for the long run.

More practically, the assertion "we will not buy from them on *Shabbat* or on a holy day" (CJB), would clarify how merchandising of any kind was considered to be a violation of the Torah's prohibition on work. Hindy Najman generally observes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, "The Sabbath...became especially significant in the exilic period. This v. represents one of the many attempts to develop and establish a coherent definition of the type of work that is prohibited on the Sabbath. (See also Ezek. 20.12, 16, 20, 24; Isa. 56.1-8; 58.13-14; Jer. 17.21-24.)."³ Derek Kidner specifies, how for this scene in Nehemiah ch. 10, "The presence of foreign traders opened a loophole in the sabbath law, for one could argue that no-one in the covenant was being put to any work in buying from them. But the people could now see that the tone and spirit of the day were being threatened. Later, when they went back on their decision, it was soon apparent how serious a threat it posed."⁴ While Nehemiah 10:31 depicts the Jewish community committing itself to be faithful to the institution of *Shabbat*, the further record does indicate that such a commitment was violated by many.

There is not only a commitment in Nehemiah 10:31 to keep the weekly Sabbath, but it is also stated, "Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts" (NIV). While not highlighted to the same extent as the weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath year was apparently also going to be observed (Exodus 23:10-11), and with it would come a nullification of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11).

10:32-33 Along with the stated intention to observe the weekly Sabbath by not conducting in commerce, and observe the Sabbath year and nullification of debts (10:31), is the further commitment, "We also instituted commandments upon ourselves to give one third of a shekel yearly toward the service of the Temple of our God" (v. 32, ATS). There is some translation variance on how to render *v'he'emadnu aleinu mitzvot* (וְהִעֲמַדְנוּ עָלֵינוּ מִצְוֹת): "We also placed ourselves under obligation" (NASU), "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands" (NIV), "We have laid upon ourselves obligations" (NJPS), "and-we-will-assume on-us commands" (Kohlenberger).⁵ Appearing in the Hifil stem, the verb *amad* (עָמַד) would here, mainly mean, "to **set forth, arrange**" (*HALOT*).⁶ Nehemiah 10:32 represents a commitment for the half-shekel (Exodus 30:13-14), the annual Temple tax (1 Chronicles 24:9; later the two-drachma tax: Matthew 17:24), to be paid. This is important, given the fact that both the Persian King Darius (Ezra 6:1-10) and King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:21-22) prescribed a provision for support of the Jerusalem Temple.

This financial commitment, to pay for the services of the Temple, involved a wide array of activities: "for the rows of bread, for the regular meal offering and for the regular burnt offering,

¹ Throntveit, 109.

² F. Charles Fensham, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp 239-240.

³ Hindy Najman, "Nehemiah," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1704.

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezra & Nehemiah* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity, 1979), 116.

⁵ Kolenberger, 3:245.

⁶ *HALOT*, 1:841.

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*for those of the sabbaths, new moons, festivals, for consecrations, for sin offerings to atone for Israel, and for all the work in the House of our God” (v. 33, NJPS). While these are cultic actions which would take place throughout the year, our attention is noticeably drawn to *haShabbatot* (הַשַּׁבָּתוֹת), rightly taken to represent the weekly Sabbath offerings (Numbers 28:9-10). Presumably, with a monetary payment to be issued to the Temple treasury—far from the returned exiles spending their money on wares on the weekly Sabbath—their money instead would go to fund the priestly service to be offered on the Sabbath.*